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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Eugene Domanico Age 88, Des Moines, Iowa
Meredith Ferguson
Dahl's Food Store
11-3-2011**

Meredith Ferguson: This is Meredith Ferguson and I'm interviewing Gene Domanaco. The date is November 3rd 2011. The time is about 2:00 in the afternoon. The interview is taking place at the Dahl's Food Store restaurant off

Ingersoll in Des Moines, Iowa. And the purpose of this interview is that it will become part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa Oral History Project. Eugene, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Eugene Domanico: You do.

Ferguson: Thank you. To start off, could you give me your full name and where you currently live?

Domanico: It's Eugene A. Domanico. And I currently live in Spokane, Washington; although, I was born in Des Moines, Iowa in 1923.

Ferguson: In 1923 okay. And you said that you were born and raised here in Des Moines, right?

Domanico: Yes.

Ferguson: So, my initial question is how did you come to work at the Iowa Commission for the Blind? Like, what led you to work with the BEP program?

Domanico: Well, I was in real-estate and was doing some different volunteer work. And, I had become acquainted with some blind students. And so, I had plenty of time and started getting interested in working with the blind because I always worked with the Lions group. And as you know, the Lions are dedicated to work with the blind. So, I interviewed with John Taylor and Kenneth Jernigan, and started working with them.

Ferguson: And what was your position when...what they interviewed you for?

Domanico: It was Business Enterprise Supervisor of Business Enterprises.

Ferguson: Supervisor, okay. What did that job entail?

Domanico: Well, it was working with the blind students who completed their training, and finding vocations for them. They had a few vending operations and they wanted to get into manual food service.

So my background, after I got out of the Air Force, was in food service, too. My brother and myself operated a food facility for eleven years before I was doing the real-estate business. So, I knew the food business.

Ferguson: Before I ask more about the Commission...I didn't ask...You said you were in the Air Force?

Domanico: Yes.

Ferguson: How long were you...?

Domanico: I joined the Air Force in 1942. Just before I was to be drafted I enlisted to be a pilot, and I became a bombardier. And, I eventually went to be stationed in England with the 447th Bomb group. And, as a bombardier I flew 18 missions over Germany and got some awards. And the war ended in Europe. After 30-day leave, to go to Des Moines, Iowa, my home town, I was assigned to B-29's

bombers; it's the bigger bombers at MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida. After I went down there and just started training down there, and there were bigger planes, the war ended, so.

Ferguson: And so after the Air Force you got into food service right after, or?

Domanico: Yes. I was in the food service from 1945 to 1955.

Ferguson: And does that...did you work in cafeterias, or?

Domanico: No, big restaurants in downtown Des Moines; large, very large restaurants. And then after a few years, that's when I started working with the Iowa Commission for the Blind; worked there for eleven years.

Ferguson: And that was in, what year did you start there? Do you remember?

Domanico: Well, I think...

Ferguson: Was it in 1965?

Domanico: It was about... It was probably right around there, 1967.

Ferguson: 1967 okay. And then you worked there until the 70's.

Domanico: It was approximately eleven years.

Ferguson: Okay. And so, you said that you worked or were familiar with real-estate. And so, then you met some blind students, and then that led to applying for the job?

Domanico: I had a real-estate broker's license, so that helped me when we were trying to get locations. The restaurant background was more of an asset because I knew the restaurant equipment; your manual equipment, and what it takes to run a restaurant.

Ferguson: Did you know anything about the Iowa Commission for the Blind before you applied for the job?

Domanico: No not very much, but I went through some training there before I started working with students.

Ferguson: Yep, that's right they do; new employees, they have go through training. What was your take on the training that you did? Did you, like, how did you feel about blindness before you started; as in, the ability for a blind person to have a job and steady employment?

Domanico: Well, I knew a little bit because I knew some blind people throughout my Lions group. So, I knew they were capable of doing what most people thought they could do. And then, of course, as I got my training...I didn't take Braille, but I got so I practiced Braille by sight, you know, reading.

Ferguson: Sure.

Domanico: But, I knew mobility; I took classes. I was able to go out with blind people to a new location and help them get acquainted with their territory. and so forth.

Ferguson: So you went through that training, so you knew how to describe something or help them understand certain things. Yeah, okay.

Domanico: I could do mobility; although, I was not a specialist like Jim Witte.

Ferguson: Did you help teach any of those classes later on?

Domanico: No, I don't think I did.

Ferguson: No; just curious. So you worked under John Taylor; he was your boss, right?

Domanico: Yes.

Ferguson: And then Kenneth Jernigan; just curious about your impressions of either Jernigan or Taylor?

Domanico: Well, I was really impressed with both of them; really impressed with Mr. Jernigan. He was a very focused individual. He wanted things to... He would take short cuts to do it. And I liked working with him because, for instance, I remember he would call me up to his office sometimes, and maybe we were going to get some additional money from the legislature. And he would say, "Mr. Domanaco, if you had so much money do you have locations you could get?" And I said, "Yeah. We've got the people to try and train if we can

get the locations;” before I’d always been held back on the money. He was letting me know that if I could get the locations, he would furnish the means.

Ferguson: Okay, what about John Taylor? What did you think of him?

Domanico: Well, I worked close with John Taylor because he was my first supervisor. As I started getting locations and stuff, they would add to my staff. As I got more locations and more vending machines, I got a vending person to help me with the vending. And later on, Nancy Bailiff, she was assigned to... I think they hired her, and then they put her in my department because she had a background in Home Ec.; and I needed a person to help me with the manual locations. One day we went in and bid on a location. Some of the newer ones was putting in manual operations; which is your stainless steel equipment, and stoves, and refrigerators, and steam tables, and etc. But, we needed someone to work with manuals, and so Nancy was really good at that. And, she was in there for as long as I was there.

Ferguson: So, you went out and you scouted new locations for manual operations, or did you look... When you were working there, did you have vending as well?

Domanico: Yes, we had some vending, quite a bit, but the vending was more not food; it was like candy, and pop, and cigarettes, and stuff like that. When I got into the manual operations with vending, then I put in food in the vending machines. I worked with the Vendo Company in Kansas City, Missouri; and went down to their commissary.

I knew restaurant food, how to prepare restaurant food in restaurants and such. But, I needed to get in to the food end of...how do you put a cheeseburger...how do you prepare it so that it would stay in good condition for 48 hours? And Vendo had those techniques. They could...they had a commissary I went to and I learned, well, how they made barbeque sauce with Jell-O, with gelatin. They would make a barbeque sauce on a cookie sheet, for example, and then freeze it. And then when they made their hamburgers, barbeque beef, or cheeseburgers, they would take a spatula and cut a 4-inch square. And everything was practically in their freezer at 33 degrees. They put the bun, the hamburger, the cheese, the barbeque sauce all together in a wrap, and put it in the vending machine.

It was color coded, which in those days was pretty good. And so, when you got something out of the vending machine...the color of it...you matched the color with the microwave. But, you see, that sauce never melted until it got hot. And so, the bun could stay in that machine for 24 hours, and it wouldn't get soggy. I learned that, even though I knew the restaurant business in and out, I didn't have those techniques. So, I learned a lot from...I have got to give credit to the commissary that the Vendo Company had.

Ferguson: So, you helped place students that graduated from the training program. You helped place them in their correct locations?

Domanico: Uh-huh.

Ferguson: Do you remember ever running into any, like, sort of discrimination when you...Like with other employees?

Domanico: Well, sometimes. Say when I bid on a place, whether it was the State House, or the Capitol, or some of those places; they heard that the Iowa Commission had got the contract for food service. And they would ask, "How are blind people going to run the food service?" And it took some convincing to... First of all, I had to go talk to whoever was in charge of that building, and convince them that we could do that. And then once we got a manual location, then we had, of course, food service right at the Commission for the Blind. So, we let them know we were doing it there, and that we would use, basically, the owner would be always blind at the location. Then we would use other handicapped people if we could, whether they were deaf, or what. We tried to use handicapped people. And then we would use whatever sighted personnel we needed to do the service, depending on how big the operation was. For instance, the state capitol, we had several; we had a cook and several salad people, and so forth.

15:00

Ferguson: Okay, so the operator or the manager was always blind or visually impaired, but then you gave priority to other handicapped or disabled people. But, you also employed sighted people when you needed to.

Domanico: Yes, as we needed. But I always worked with the location to get the contract itself. And you got to remember we were bidding against established food service. For instance, like that Oscar Meyer plant in Perry...Pella, I guess. When they put out that bid, there was three or four

food service companies. I had to go there and convince them what we would do. We would put in all new equipment, and so forth.

Ferguson: How did you go about convincing them when you ran into discrimination?

Domanico: I told them what locations they could see.

Ferguson: Did that help? Was that one of the...

Domanico: Once we got manual service at two or three locations, it was easier, then, to convince people; for instance, that one at Oscar Meyer. There were requirements that you have manual food service during the day time, but vending service the rest of the day and weekends. So, we had to have full service 24 hours a day. So, on that particular one I'd take my vending person and Nancy, and we would prepare menus for the manual operation. And she would work with people on preparing food to go into the vending machines. So it got to be quite an operation.

Ferguson: Let's see, I'm going through my list of questions. We're kind of jumping all over which is fine. Whatever comes to mind, just start talking. So, did you... When you first started you said there was vending already, or did that come along?

Domanico: Yes, there was vending already.

Ferguson: While you were working there, did it pick up in popularity? Did you kind of see...

Domanico: Well, we put food in the vending machines where before there were staples, just staples.

Ferguson: Did you see, during the time that you worked for the Commission, did you see vending start to get favored more over the manual cafeterias?

Domanico: Well, I can't say that it was. Vending was coming on its own, more places like rest stops; as you notice the list of rest stops now. And so, vending's so handy there, where it would be practically impossible to set up the food location at each rest stop.

Ferguson: Did you have... Did you set up a lot of rest stops, or was it more like Oscar Meyer?

Domanico: I don't remember setting up any rest stops.

Ferguson: So it was more like Oscar Meyer, the Oscar Meyer cafeteria; those types of contracts?

Domanico: The State House and federal buildings, and court houses; different ones.

Ferguson: Do you remember the post office in Council Bluffs or the court house?

Domanico: Not too much.

Ferguson: No, that's fine because you have the State and the Federal Building, Oscar Meyer Cafeteria. I was just trying to

get an idea of, like, what type of buildings you had cafeterias set up in.

Domanico: In the eleven years I was there, I think I had... I found a sheet of paper not long ago, I think, 18 locations.

Ferguson: That you helped set up?

Domanico: Yeah.

Ferguson: Okay, the cafeteria in the Commission where you... That was set up before you started?

Domanico: Yes, the students were eating there.

Ferguson: Was that full-service at the time you started?

Domanico: Yes, it was pretty good.

Ferguson: Was it fairly popular?

Domanico: Yes, the students lived in.

Ferguson: Okay, did staff eat there or use it at all?

Domanico: Yes.

Ferguson: I'm not sure when it went away. Was it still there when you left?

Domanico: Yes.

Ferguson: It's just interesting to think about, because now we just have vending machines down there. And so, it's interesting to try and picture a, like a full-size cafeteria down there.

Do you remember a location in Dubuque at all? Or, I have a name Richard Brown. He was supposed to be an operator.

Domanico: No, I saw that. That doesn't ring a bell with me. I've forgotten so many names.

Ferguson: Okay. Don Abben, in the Waterloo area?

Domanico: Well, if Don was there years ago, but I don't... The name doesn't ring a bell.

Ferguson: Okay. I'm trying to...these are all names that Roger gave me to try and, maybe, give me an idea. So after you set up a location and you got somebody, a manager/operator to take it over, did you stay involved with that location at all?

Domanico: Oh yes.

Ferguson: To what extent?

Domanico: Well, making sure that everything was running smoothly, and that the location was happy with the operation. If they said we need more of this, or more of that, we would change the operation. And then we kept track of the operations, and how much money they were doing. That was all compiled back at the accounting at the Commission;

what locations we had and how much the program had built. And that's the reason we hired more in my department. We had...Al Fisher was there when I got there and then Nancy Bailiff, and then we had another man that helped with vending, Jerry something. I can't...

Ferguson: I don't have a Jerry.

Domanico: I can't remember his name. I left there approximately in '76, I think. Then I still worked in Spokane with Services for the Blind; still on their board and went to their board meetings, and did Lions work.

Ferguson: So, you were there approximately until '76. So, do you recall any kind of controversy at all associated with the Commission at that time? Because I know, just having read some of the histories, that Jernigan himself and the Commission could sometimes be controversial. Like with the newspapers, or with various legislators, and things like that.

Domanico: Well, I knew that there was the blind groups themselves.

Ferguson: The consumer groups?

Domanico: Well, the associations. You had two associations. You had the National Federation of the Blind and then they had I forget the other name.

Ferguson: The American Council?

Domanico: The American Council. It's kind of like the political; the Republicans and Democrats. In fact, I remember that I knew that was happening when I was interviewed for employment. They asked me if I knew about that, and I said, "Well, I don't want to get involved with that. I intend to keep busy in that department." And they said that's fine. I know I didn't go to a lot of their meetings because I had my own department to worry about. And I didn't, politically, I didn't get involved. The eleven years I was there, I didn't get involved.

Ferguson: Okay, that's interesting that when you interviewed they asked if you knew what was going on, or your reaction to it.

That question...I was leading up to the little Randolph-Sheppard Act. It was the Iowa law that they passed to get to release for cafeterias and vending for the blind; like, it gave the Iowa Commission priority to set up cafeterias or vending stands in state and federally funded buildings. Do you remember that at all?

Domanico: Now that you mention it now, the Randolph-Sheppard Act, I'd forgotten all about it. It gave us an equal opportunity to bid on places. In fact, it got our foot in the door; that's what it did. So if we could convince the owners of the building or whatever it was that we could do the job; they had to give us equal rights. They couldn't just deny us, and say you cannot come in here because the blind aren't capable of doing this. So, the Randolph-Sheppard Act was very helpful, but we still had to do...we still had to provide results. If we didn't provide results, you know, you'd be asked to leave. And while I was there, we never was asked

to leave any facility. I don't know specifically, but I imagine, sometimes, we got suggestions. And I was always open for suggestions. If you wanted to do a good job, always people knew they could come to Gene; and if they thought something was unsanitary, or whatever. I knew the sanitation rules, too. It was fun working there the eleven years, and I met a lot of nice people, and had a lot of nice friends.

Ferguson: Good! Were there any other names besides Kenneth Jernigan or John Taylor? They were the two that, the two big names that I could think of.

Domanico: Well, the operators themselves. You got pretty close with the operators. And since I lost a lot of memory; a lot of it, I guess, is age related. A lot of it was the stroke that I had. I don't know if you noticed since we started the interview that I am now 88-years-old. And I'm not making any excuses, because otherwise I'm in very good health, but I did lose a lot of memory. I wish I could recall more information for you.

Ferguson: Oh, that's okay. Honestly, you've been doing really great and obviously it helped that I got real excited that you remembered the Randolph-Sheppard Act, because I was hoping that you'd have an opinion on it.

Domanico: I haven't heard that name in probably 40 years.

Ferguson: Do you remember, did it have a pretty big impact on Iowa overall, or would you say it was just those people that worked for the Commission?

Domanico: Well, I think that any time that you have a blind person that is doing something that the outside world thinks that the blind can't do, it's very good. It's just like... Now, when I moved to Spokane...Nancy Bailiff...we moved together to Spokane, and then we were co-directors of the Lilac Blind Foundation. Now, when they put in, like, their low vision department, it became real good. And it showed the public that we could help people with low vision and all types.

Now, the biggest thing I think that's come along in the last few years is computers. I'll give you an example. If I, as a blind person, say, got some kind of cancer, say gastric cancer. As a blind person, I'd have to get someone, if I wanted to know all the information on that type of cancer, I'd have to get someone to go to the library with me because if the stuff was there in Braille, it's probably 20-years-old. So, if I got someone there who could probably get some information. But now, as a blind person, if you get into computers and people will say, well, how can blind people get into computers? Well, I know of two programs. One is Magic software. Do you know about Magic?

Ferguson: I don't know that much about Magic.

Domanico: Magic magnifies the screen enough to, like a CCTV. And you can have, if you have low vision that you could still see, but you need the magnification; Magic will magnify it and do everything and help you out.

30:00

Domanico: And then there's another software...

Ferguson: JAWS?

Domanico: JAWS, that's it. JAWS is verbal, right? Now this blind person can get on the computer, get on JAWS, and he can find out the latest information as a sighted person. So, that's so great of an improvement. So, it's just great that the blind have access now.

Ferguson: It's come a long way.

Domanico: I've seen it from way back to today.

Ferguson: So, how did the people that you worked with, the operators or your blind employees; how did they find out information that they needed to know? Did they have readers that helped them, like, if they had any materials that they needed to read on the job, or if they needed to find more information about a piece of equipment, or something like that?

Domanico: Well, Nancy would train them as far as their job went as the information. And I had to take care of the job location the lease, the signed lease to see that we were doing the lease. But they kept up with the information, you know.

Ferguson: It's just a fascinating question to add, like, over the years especially, because obviously, they didn't have computers back then and they didn't have screen readers. And so, it's interesting to hear if people hired readers to go

through school, for example, or if they had stuff Brailled at the Commission, that kind of thing.

Domanico: Well, on that you'd probably have to ask staff members that were there every day working with the students. All I knew was the students I worked with had already completed their training.

Say we went to another town. We had to find living quarters, either Nancy or myself, or the vending person, had to make sure that they could get...knew what they were doing in their living quarters, so that they became self-sufficient getting to work.

Ferguson: So you helped with... You found the location, and you also helped whoever you got to operate it, you helped them get set up to wherever they were going, the whole thing?

Domanico: Yeah; especially, if it was out of town, like that.

Ferguson: Okay, so I wanted to ask about the Lilac Services that you're involved with now because you... Did you get involved with that agency after you moved from here?

Domanico: Yes, when Nancy and I moved there we were co-directors, and then I sort of semi-retired, and so she took over there. Lilac had services for about 18 counties in Iowa (Narrator says Iowa, but means Washington state), and about three counties in northern Idaho. So the teachers went out to all these counties. Their basic job was to keep blind people from going into nursing homes; to delay that, as it is here. You know you save thousands of dollars if the

person loses a spouse and they're blind. A lot of people think, well, that person can't live alone. Well, if they receive training; for instance, Nancy would go to their home and make sure, number one, they could use the phone, they could call the doctor, or they could call somebody. That they knew how to fix coffee or to Braille their microwave or...that's the training we have here, and in all the states. So we did the same thing in Iowa (Washington). We stepped up some of the programs there.

Ferguson: In Washington?

Domanico: In Washington.

Ferguson: So the Lilac services, is that just in the state of Washington, or is it in other states?

Domanico: Well, every state has some kind of services. Some states are better than others.

Ferguson: But the Lilac Services that you're with, that's just for Washington?

Domanico: Yes.

Ferguson: I just wanted to be sure.

Domanico: No their territories, like I say, is 18 counties and three in Idaho. Of course, their services are always free; here was never a charge. Lilac built up their services there. Their low vision department became very efficient; had the okay from optometrists and ophthalmologists. In some

states, you were stepping on their toes. I remember when Lilac went to enter the low vision services department, we sent a letter out to the optometrists and the ophthalmologists saying we were going to go into the low vision aids, and they responded with favor, glad. You know, they had a little card in their office with a few magnifiers on it. Well, their time is not to sit down with somebody and work with somebody on magnifiers. And, our low vision department was set up, and it just increased so good. And if someone come in and got a low vision aid, if they were loaned it or if they bought it, it was all guaranteed. So, they could bring it back if they paid for it or if they got it free. And most of it was free, but the service department was right there. Now, there's one of the staff members, that's practically their full-time job.

Ferguson: What made you move to Washington and get involved with the Lilac services there?

Domanico: Well, there was a man, Al Fisher?

Ferguson: Al Fisher, yes.

Domanico: He was here, and he was...I'm not sure what connection he had back in Iowa, but he was actually recruiting for Lilac Blind Foundation. And he came and offered Nancy a job as Director if we would move. And, she had me fly to Spokane and look the area over and everything. And when I checked the climate and everything and found out the summers weren't as hot, and no tornadoes, and the winters weren't as cold, so forth. Spokane had a change of seasons like Des Moines, but they

aren't severe like here. So that made up our mind to move there.

Ferguson: You were just ready for a change?

Domanico: Well, boating was my hobby, and I could continue that there. Spokane had ten-thousand lakes, like Minnesota.

Ferguson: Never been to Washington. Always wanted to go, though; heard good things.

I've run through my list of questions, so is there anything that's triggered your memory that you want to talk more about, or do you want to expand on anything?

Domanico: Well, Roger kind of helped me out. I was so surprised and glad that the Commission did all that remodeling; just great. I was just thrilled when I went in there.

Ferguson: Yeah, because it's been a while.

Domanico: So many improvements. No, that's about all I can remember.

Ferguson: Okay do you, because you worked so much with the blind for so many years, now, is there... Do you think, like, public opinion of blindness has changed at all since you first got into the field?

Domanico: Well, yes it's come a long ways, you know. They've done things to help the blind, like on street corners, and things with electronics, and the low vision aids. All

kinds of aids and appliances, you know, for a person living alone after losing their sight; can delay that time that they have to go into a nursing home, which saves thousands of dollars. And with the computers I think we're just, we're going to keep improving.

Ferguson: Yeah just... It grows on a daily basis by leaps and bounds.

Domanico: And I was with the Lions clubs, here. And have been a member of Spokane Central Lions for 35 years. And they just started...that's a downtown club in Spokane. And they just started a year ago, a Lions club in a suburb like West Des Moines, here. Liberty Lake is a suburb of Spokane, about 13 miles from downtown. And, they asked me if I'd help the new Lions Club get started.

Ferguson: I didn't ask about your Lions Club involvement here in Iowa...

Domanico: Well, I was in it just a little while before I left. Wasn't really involved here much, you know.

Ferguson: Were there any activities while you were a member here that you got involved with, or?

Domanico: No, I don't remember.

Ferguson: That's fine. I was just trying to think of, if you could talk about what they did with blindness...were they spokespersons? Did they sponsor any activities, or like, do scholarships or something like that?

Domanico: Well, they did a lot of...they had a lot of activities because, you know, Helen Keller years ago...1922 I think it was. She asked the Lions to be knights of the blind. So they've always been available; for instance, like in Spokane after my wife died, the Lilac set up a golf tournament every year, the Nancy Domanico Golf Tournament for Lilac Blind Services. And the local Lions club, they couldn't set that up without all the members of the Lions club, because it takes a lot of people to run a golf tournament. And the Lions have pitched in every year on it. This year that tournament in Spokane is the biggest tournament they have. They had two movie stars sponsor the tournament for the past two years.

Ferguson: Oh, very cool!

Domanico: I'm trying to think of their names. One was on television called, "Coach".

Ferguson: "Coach;" oh I know that TV show, yeah.

Domanico: He had that. He was one of the sponsors of the tournament. And then there's an older lady actor from Quarter Lane. Both of them have done the commercials for the golf tournament the last two years.

Ferguson: Oh good! Clearly you're staying involved in your... You're working with helping blind services, and also...

Domanico: Yeah, it's one of my passions and I'll always be involved with, either through Lions... I don't hit every board meeting Lilac has. And I try to hit the annual one when they

have marketing meetings. And I go to downtown Lions meetings on Tuesdays. I usually go downtown and go to Lilac and visit with the Director and some of the staff that I've known for years.

Ferguson: Well, good. Well, if there isn't anything else you'd like to add I'll go ahead and shut it off.

Domanico: No.

44:36

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

11-16-2011